

Lent 5
29/3/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 31:31 - 34

Psalm 31

Hebrew 5:5 – 10

John 12:20 - 34

Habits of the heart

The reading from Jeremiah is well known. It is cherished in Christian circles because it refers to a new covenant. Another word for covenant is Testament so many have taken this to refer to everything that we associate with being Christian. But that is not the context of the reading.

Jeremiah's message comes within a broader context of his prophecy, which has two sides: one, directed to a people about to be sent into exile, which was about uprooting and breaking down: judgement. The other directed to the people in Babylon at the time when hope of release began to dawn, which was about planting and building up: redemption.

Much of Jeremiah's writing contains words of unremitting judgment inspired by a complete breakdown in the relationship between God and the people. He called them fools because they no longer had any consciousness of God, and gave up all sense of respect and care for others. They had become skilled and cunning in doing evil, while being numbed to the social and political realities around them. Jeremiah aimed to shock people whose lives were being lived against God, into appreciating the depth of feeling God attached to their failure in faith and life.

“Will you murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal and go after other gods, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name and say, “We are safe!” – only to go on doing all these abominations?” (Ch 7:9 -10)

Such dark prophecies were an attempt to penetrate the anaesthetized conscience of his audience, and the shocking thing is his words are not very remote from us. Thoughtful people already know that people of faith have an ethical responsibility in the world. We have to discern the truth about the troubles of our times: climate change, and the injustices perpetrated in places from Gaza to Zimbabwe, and in the board-rooms and executive suites of big corporations. Sensitive souls know that if we fail to live faithfully and address the big issues affecting the majority of the world's population, we will pay the price.

Jeremiah was not shy of seeing the truth about the gravity and depth of human sin, and Jeremiah also knew of the possibility of redemption through reconnecting with the One who is the source of true wisdom and knowledge. In the reading for today he goes straight to the heart of the matter. “The days are coming,” he says when God will bring profound consolation to an uprooted, exiled people who had been living with a sense of total breakdown in their life and faith. Now he offers a vision of restoration based on a renewed relationship with God, a new ethic, and a renewed community.

To our ears this offer seems so far out in left field it is difficult to comprehend. And there is another element: these words shine with the sort with a light that makes everything else look grey, or worse. In this sense, they become words of judgment among us.

The New Covenant was preached to people who were attached to the Mosaic covenant and the Ten Commandments. Faith and trust in the God who had given the people freedom committed them to a life of ethical responsibility in the world, gratefully undertaken. But the people continually turned away from God, broke the commandments and abrogated the covenant. When it came to the Mosaic covenant, resistance was normal.

There was need for a new Covenant but this did not mean the old one will be done away with. It means it will be imposed and received differently. As before, God will be the author, but this time the covenant will be carved on the seat of the will, the heart, and it will affect both Israel and Judah – all of God’s people - and the new normal will be obedience. All inclination to refuse or disobey will evaporate and doing the will of God will be like eating and breathing. Obedience will be the people’s “habit of the heart” because the knowledge of sin that had governed them will be replaced with the knowledge of God.

Jeremiah’s picture seems like an end time vision – something a bit out of reach - and our struggle is to see how to integrate this. He pictures an easy, integrated relationship between God and the people: “I will be their God and they will be my people.” There will be no doubt whose they are and: “they shall all know me, from the least to the greatest”. Does this mean they will all be party to some form of mystic knowledge?

It is more concrete than that. It means they will know - in the deepest sense of that word - the tradition of Moses and the prophets. They will be able to recite the words of faith, and will have an integrated understanding of the truth of the tradition given to them. From their hearts they will be enabled to give their undivided, personal loyalty to God who gave them life and delivered them into freedom, and they will live in God’s ways.

And there is something more. This covenant is offered from the gracious heart of God to people who have suffered severe breakdown in faith and hope, and have been removed from their land to a hostile place. The newness that is offered to them here comes as pure gift and, given Jeremiah’s earlier words to them, could hardly have been expected. The miracle of these words is that God chooses to enter into relationship once more. God comes to break the cycle of alienation and hopelessness with the offer of a remarkable new beginning. God has seen the failures of the people and their iniquity. God has stared their wickedness in the face, and yet, from the heart, chooses to remember their faults no longer. The judgement of God comes in the choice to offer the gift of renewed life, which is to be translated into new living.

What has this to do with us? Christians share an interest in living God's way "from the heart". The focus of the season of Lent is the question: what does it really mean to follow Christ? And the disciplines of Lent are about exerting ourselves to refine and deepen our grasp on discipleship. This is consistent with the ancient idea of asceticism, which was based on the repetitive, disciplined practice required for developing a new skill. It also speaks about embedding a habit in the heart so that mind and heart and action become integrated.

In Christian tradition the effort involved was never for its own sake. It was born of an eagerness of soul that was rooted in God's prior gift of merciful, transforming love that enabled an entirely new start in life. It was born of the accepting grace made known in Christ at Easter, who stared our worst wickedness in the face and did not hold onto his life. He fell like a seed into the ground, and in the power of God was raised up to draw the world into unexpected new life. For us the question of what does it really mean to follow Christ, is answered by saying: we aim to live, knowing the Gospel of him who, in his death demonstrated, from the heart, what it means to live in the power of God's grace.

Christians are called to live on the basis of God's renewing love for the world. This means we seek a clean heart, one that lives by hope and promise, not by vengeance and despair. This means when the church is losing its way in the world, and people no longer know what it stands for, we return to the deep things gifted to us, and find there the focus for our life. God's renewing love for all humanity is the basis for our efforts to live out the Gospel. It forms the foundation of our decisions about leadership, at all levels of our church and our choices about what shape our presence will take in this community. And because God's gift to us is a challenge to our own lives and the lives of others, it is the basis off all our work for towards justice and peace in the world. God grant that we may live, faithfully and fully, in that strength.
